United Nations E/CN.6/2018/NGO/16/Rev.1

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
20 February 2018

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Sixty-second session
12–23 March 2018
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century"

Statement submitted by Education International, International Trade Union Confederation, International Transport Workers' Federation, International Union of Food Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers Associations, Public Services International, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

18-02621 (E) 230218

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Statement

Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls

Rural women make up a quarter of the world's population. They play a vital role in improving livelihoods and strengthening communities through their contributions to food security and nutrition, income generation and providing for the well-being of their families. However, rural women and girls continue to face systemic and persistent barriers to the full enjoyment of their human rights. They are more likely to be offered short term, precarious contracts and lower paid jobs, have challenges accessing their rights to maternity benefits, face widespread gender-based violence and are more exposed to injuries and fatalities as they work in high risk sectors such as agriculture and transport.

Women in rural areas, particularly peasant women and indigenous women, are often victims of the dispossession that follows land grabbing, and the expansion of extractive industries. Although they are valuable sources of climate-related knowledge and valuable actors in climate-change mitigation, adaptation and risk reduction, rural women are also disproportionately affected by climate change and pollution, and are often excluded from climate debates and policy-making.

Among the many structural causes of these discriminations is the low participation and representation of women in decision-making in rural areas. As a consequence, rural women's rights and specific needs remain insufficiently addressed in laws, and in policies and government spending and private and public investment strategies. Even where such laws and policies take rural women's realities into account and establish special measures to address them, these measures are often not effectively implemented. Structural barriers include rural women producers' lack of access to land ownership as well as to credit, markets, technology, transport and other necessary support measures.

Access to Decent Work and Labour Rights

Millions of rural women are employed in agriculture and other sectors, but are systematically denied the basic rights set out in the ILO's core conventions, including the right to freedom of association and the right to collectively bargain the terms and conditions of their employment, which are key enabling rights to ensure sustainable improvements in workers' living and working conditions. Isolated and marginalized communities, remote work locations, lack of job opportunities, lack of access to education and vocational training, and other barriers increase rural women's vulnerability to labour exploitation and abuse, including gender-based violence and harassment. In many countries, sectors like agriculture and domestic work are excluded from national and local labour laws and protections. National laws and policies must facilitate women workers' organizing to define their own needs and priorities around decent work. Women workers and women-led organizations must be actively involved in developing policy and programs to address access to labour rights. Too often, programs designed to empower rural women workers are developed without even consulting the women they are intended to benefit, let alone centring their experiences and needs.

Education is key to empowering rural girls and women

Girls who live in rural, remote or marginalized areas are at greater risk of not completing school. Structural barriers and entrenched discriminatory social no continue to restrict access and demand for girls' education. These norms are reflected in practices such as early and child marriage, early motherhood, traditional seclusion that restricts travel to schools, favouring of boys in families' education investment, gendered division of household labour, and alarmingly high rates of school-related gender-based violence, which undermines attempts to achieve gender equality in education.

Long commutes and the lack of good water and sanitation in rural schools have a disproportionate impact on girls' participation in education. In many countries, girls spend more time on domestic work than boys and are more likely to combine schooling and household chores. In countries with high levels of child labour, girls are forced to combine employment with household chores, putting them at greater risk of repeating grades or dropping out of school, and of early marriage. In general, child domestic work is socially tolerated, nearly invisible and unlikely to be reached by child labour laws, and receives little attention from policy-makers.

Public services support the empowerment of rural women

Rural women have been among the worst affected by the drastic cuts in social spending. Policies prescribed and enforced under structural adjustment programmes imposed on the global south, and austerity policies everywhere, together with the development of tax regimes that favour multinational companies and reduce government revenue have systematically weakened governments' capacity to protect basic labour rights and pursue policies to advance gender equality. State delivery of effective social protection has also been undermined, pushing governments to turn to public-private partnerships (PPPs) whose failure has been repeatedly documented. As a consequence, gender inequalities have been exacerbated by rural women's increasing burden of unpaid work.

Gender responsive public services help deconstruct the historical sexual division of labour, by ensuring services are delivered and organized in ways that promote gender equality and eliminate discrimination. Quality public services such as childcare and elder care are critical factors in reducing and redistributing unpaid care work, and must form part of universal social protection systems. Access to potable and affordable water and sanitation through public services is also essential to address the gender gap in rural areas, as are safe public transport, affordable and universal health care and adequate access to affordable energy.

Public-Public Partnerships (PuPs), a trade union response to privatisation and PPPs, can enhance the key dimensions of "publicness": equity and efficiency; participation and accountability; solidarity and (political, social, financial and environmental) sustainability. PuPs can be an effective way to deliver public services to rural areas.

Recommendations

As global union federations, we call on Member States at the CSW to take urgent action on the following key aspects of rural women's lives:

Decent Work

Actively support access to freedom of association for rural women. Recognise that ILO standards and technical co-operation have a key part to play in empowering rural women, and ratify and implement the ILO Core Conventions and key ILO Conventions: Plantations Convention (No. 110), Labour Inspection (Agriculture) Convention (No. 129), Rural Workers' Organisations Convention (No. 141), Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention (No. 156), Maternity Protection Convention (No. 183), Safety and Health in Agriculture Convention (No. 184), Domestic Workers (No. 189). Review national legislation to ensure the application of labour laws to all rural workers, including the right to freedom of association. Ensure that rural women workers are aware of the full range of their labour rights. Support global policy coherence and a new approach to agriculture, centring the right to food and decent work in agriculture, that does not rely on child labour but is based on a skilled, trained and fairly remunerated workforce, and is environmentally sustainable.

Public Services and Financing

Promote public-public and public community partnerships to provide public services in rural areas, incorporating women in decision making. Meet international commitments to maximise available resources, notably public tax revenues, to invest in quality, Gender-Responsive Public Services and social protections. End harmful tax competition, illicit financial flows, and regressive reforms to the current global tax system. Establish an inclusive intergovernmental UN Global Tax Body.

Quality Public Education

Ensure that rural women and girls can access quality public education and lifelong learning in rural and remote areas. Provide training, decent salaries and effective career paths free from gender bias to attract and retain female teachers in rural schools. Provide access to safe transport to school, and implement measures to eradicate violence in and around schools. Develop second-chance options for those who exit formal schooling early due to poverty, child/early marriage, pregnancy and other challenges. Enforce policies to support the readmission of girls following the birth of a child, especially in rural areas. Develop skills-training programmes and vocational training qualifications toward decent work and increased representation in traditionally male-dominated occupations for rural women workers. Introduce gender-responsive budgeting and increasing public investment in education to ensure that sufficient funds are allocated to building more rural schools, and ensure adequate and good quality water and sanitation facilities in rural schools.

Climate Justice

Integrate rural and Indigenous women in planning processes for disaster response or risk reduction measures, and integrate them into climate change decision-making. Ensure gender responsive planning and investment for a Just Transition, inclusive of rural and Indigenous women.

Human Rights

Adhere to CEDAW General Recommendation No. 34 on the Rights of Rural Women. Engage rural women workers, including women with multiple and intersecting identities, in the development of national policies regarding rural issues.